

Working with Linguistically and Culturally Isolated Communities: The Cambodian Outreach Project of Merrimack Valley Legal Services

By Trang Nguyen

A Merrimack Valley Legal Services advocate met with a Cambodian woman for what the advocate thought would be a typical first interview. The advocate's file stated only that the client was interested in pursuing a divorce. During the interview the advocate learned some interesting, yet not uncommon, facts. The client had spent the last ten years of her life debating whether to file for a divorce. She was anxious about losing her four children, feared that her violent husband would make life more difficult for her but hoped that he could one day change, worried about the societal stigma of divorce, and doubted whether she herself had been the perfect spouse—all normal concerns of a woman in her situation.

An hour and a half into the interview, the client told the advocate how her hesitation arose from her belief that perhaps in her previous life she committed a bad act against this man and was therefore serving out her punishment in this life by being married to him—a belief reinforced by a culture that observes a tradition of arranged marriages and that tends to blame the woman for almost every marital problem; for example, a bad wife may force her husband to have an extramarital affair.

These concerns turned out not to be unique to this client. On any given day

the elevator door to Merrimack will open and at least three or four Cambodian clients will shyly walk up to the front desk and ask to speak with Samnang Mam, the Cambodian paralegal who has become the integral link between Merrimack and the Cambodian community in Lowell, Massachusetts. For staff members at Merrimack, this is not uncommon; it is even expected.

Merrimack did not always attract many Cambodian clients. In the past, the office would get one or two clients, and at least one would not come back because of the burden on the client to bring a translator. With the exception of a domestic violence project known largely to women, not men, in the community, legal services were not well known within the Lowell Cambodian community. Furthermore, no effort was made to discover if such an agency existed (never mind what services it provided) because there was such a strong distrust of government and authority.

Then, in March 2001, Merrimack added the Cambodian Outreach Project, an organization initiated by Greater Boston Legal Services under a grant from Boston's Harry Dow Foundation, in an effort to provide better service to the largest minority population in Lowell. This

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collaboration gave Merrimack the opportunity that it needed to reach out to this traditionally underserved and isolated population.

The need to extend service to historically underserved and underrepresented communities is a concern shared by many different organizations, particularly legal services. Volumes have been written about approaches and strategies for attracting these clients.¹ In this article I focus on the Cambodian Outreach Project to illustrate one approach to working with a linguistically and culturally isolated community.

History of Cambodians in Lowell, Massachusetts

From its beginning as a planned mill city, Lowell's unique and rich history has made it an attractive place of residence for many immigrant groups, particularly Cambodian immigrants. According to the 2000 census, 171,937 Cambodians are living in the United States; 19,696 reside in Massachusetts, the second—behind California—largest number of Cambodians in the United States. Within Massachusetts, 17,301 are in the Greater Boston area, with the greatest concentration in Lowell and Lynn.²

Most of Lowell's Cambodian residents came as refugees to the United States in the early 1980s. Cambodians are estimated to make up 20 percent of Lowell's current population of 103,000, with large communities in the neighborhood areas

known as the Acre and the Lower Highlands.³ These immigrants have a common experience. Their personal stories of pain, anger, distrust, and suffering reflect Cambodia's own turbulent and politically complex history.⁴

For most of the Cambodian immigrants in Lowell, their arrival in the United States may have meant balancing a welcome freedom from violent political upheavals with startlingly new challenges. For example, imagine the first experience with the cold New England winters for a people from a country whose coldest winters boasted temperatures in the high 60s. These immigrants also had to deal with an unfamiliar urban environment. Many of them came from small farming provinces. In this new land they encountered an environment, culture, and language foreign from their own. Many had no concept of a neutral court system to enforce rights or of a government that provided benefits to them and to their children.

Today Cambodian commercial establishments such as restaurants, markets, video stores, temples, and parks speak to the fact that the Cambodians of Lowell have made this historic city their second homeland.⁵ There are children in schools, English-as-a-second-language training, cultural festivals, and even an elected city councilor.⁶

Although the Cambodian immigrants have embraced Lowell as their own city, they remain to a great extent culturally

¹ See generally Loretta Price & Melinda Davis, *Seeds of Change: A Bibliographic Introduction to Law and Organizing* 26 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 615–68 (2002). This comprehensive bibliography is the place to begin research on community-based projects. Organized into given sections (law and organizing; basics, classics, narratives; histories and theories of poverty lawyering; legal education for rebellious lawyering; and popular education and participatory research), it summarizes 238 articles and has two appendices (one listing audiovisual materials and the other listing national and regional organizations, training centers, and the like). *Id.*, www.law.utk.edu/faculty/price.htm.

² See Data Cambodians in the U.S. Census, www.ucammn.org/resarcamin20.html. The census figures are widely considered to represent an undercount of the actual population of Cambodians in Massachusetts, particularly the number in Lowell.

³ See Cambodian Neighborhood Walking Tour, University of Massachusetts Lowell Library, Center for Lowell History, <http://library.uml.edu/clh/Cam/Cambw1.htm>.

⁴ See *Cambodia's Troubled History*, BBC NEWS, July 24 1998, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/133533.stm>. For more information, see *Timeline: Cambodia's Troubled History*, ABCNEWS.com, <http://archive.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/cambodiatimeline709>.

⁵ See Cambodian Neighborhood Walking Tour, *supra* note 3.

⁶ To learn more about Cambodian culture in Lowell, see *id.*

and linguistically isolated from the mainstream population. They are socially isolated in that many of them still retain the cultural beliefs and traditions of their homeland. Most of those who came in the early 1980s lacked an educational background. Many resorted to manual labor once they got to the United States because of the critical need to support their families. As a result, many Cambodians in Lowell remain isolated economically from their wealthier neighbors.

Many Cambodians still faithfully practice the Buddhist faith. For spiritual purposes, isolation is requisite. But beliefs may hinder mainstream interactions. For example, Buddhist belief in karma often hinders a client from making life-changing decisions, such as leaving an abusive husband, reporting a landlord's code violations, or saying anything negative about a landlord in court.

The isolation extends to the advocates serving these clients. Many agencies lack a person on staff who can speak the client's language and understand the client's culture.

Before the outreach project and the Merrimack Domestic Violence Project, there was little understanding of the American legal system or, to many parents, the educational system. What we might term a respect for authority was really a fear of authority. For the outreach project, Merrimack named Samnang to be the full-time project director. Samnang's presence in the office had immediate effects. The word quickly spread that Merrimack had a new Cambodian advocate on board. The clients immediately took to Samnang. This is due in part to his shy, respectful demeanor, but mostly it is because Samnang has a personal history not unlike their own.

Samnang was born in central Cambodia and grew up in a village of mostly farmers. In 1970 he and his family escaped to the city to avoid a civil war. In the city he studied pharmacy for two years at a university. When the Khmer Rouge

came to power in 1975, the government ordered all schools and universities to be shut down. Towns were evacuated, intellectuals were rounded up and killed, and most of the population were subjected to forced labor in the countryside.⁷ Like most other Cambodians in the city, Samnang and his family were also forced into the countryside to endure hard labor. More than a million people, including friends and relatives, died from torture, disease, and starvation.⁸

In 1979 the Vietnamese army entered Cambodia and captured Phnom Penh, the capital city. The country was once again renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Under the People's Republic the country began the healing process, and efforts commenced to restore basic freedoms.⁹

To support his family, Samnang did farm work for a few years. Then in 1982 he and his family retreated to a displaced persons camp on the Khmer-Thailand border. He spent the next ten years there until he and his family entered the United States.

Samnang's first destination in the United States was North Carolina. He recalls feeling lonely and isolated because there were no other Cambodians living around him. He contacted a friend whom he met during his time in the camp, and one and one-half months later he and his family ended up in Lowell. The supportive environment that Samnang and his family needed was Lowell. There are markets and restaurants and temples and, most important, other Cambodians. He set about educating himself in a new country, attended first college then law school, where he was a student when he joined Merrimack.

Integration of Cambodian Outreach Project and Merrimack

With Samnang on board as the cultural guide, the project team set out to strategize on outreach efforts and community legal education. In the beginning staff collected information on key community

⁷ See *Cambodia's Troubled History*, *supra* note 4.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

agencies and advocates who dealt with the Cambodian community in Lowell. The project staff would visit each agency to discuss and explore opportunities for collaboration with the agencies to serve the Cambodian population better.

In May 2001 the Project hosted a meeting of key community advocates to highlight some of the issues facing Cambodian clients. At the meeting the project formed an advisory committee whose role would be to keep abreast of emerging new issues.

Also at the meeting the agencies requested that the project participate in providing community legal education not only to the clients but also to the advocates so that they can serve the clients better. Two months later the project responded by hosting a special education workshop for clients and advocates. Since then, the project has conducted several training sessions and workshops on public benefits, housing, family law, and elder law.

For his part, Samnang took outreach to another level, visiting temples and stores to drop off copies of project brochures. Once a week he was on the local Khmer radio station to talk about the project and to answer questions about legal rights and benefits. Samnang recognized that this was a community heavily reliant on word of mouth; the radio show became a key means of getting legal information to those who most needed it.

The results were immediate. Project staff received calls from agencies on behalf of their clients; the number of client walk-ins and of cases involving Cambodian clients increased.

New cases were brought to the weekly Merrimack case acceptance meetings, where they were assigned to an advocate. The goal was to integrate the casework into the program so that project clients could benefit from the expertise of the entire Merrimack staff. The project cases covered such areas as housing, ben-

efits, elder law, special education, and family law.

Currently most project cases are accepted for individual representation rather than for group representation. Before January 2002, Merrimack had a National Association for Public Interest Lawyers fellow who was funded to do community economic development work. The goal was to have the fellow work closely with the project to assist Cambodian clients in buying their first homes. Although some work was begun, such as meetings with Cambodian business groups and a number of potential clients, the fellow left the program in January 2002. The funding for that activity was gone as well. However, the funding loss has had no effect on the growth of the individual cases that are coming in through the outreach project.

Isolating one key factor to account for the outreach project's success is difficult. The project's success stems from a combination of factors. One is the full integration of the project with Merrimack. The Project was able to draw upon the entire resources of Merrimack. Intakes were brought to case acceptance, where they would be assigned to a Merrimack specialist.

Another factor is the strong cultural tie that Samnang supplied to the community. Samnang's role in the office is crucial. Besides handling his own cases, he often serves as interpreter for other advocates.¹⁰ Interpreters undoubtedly help an advocacy team communicate with linguistically and culturally isolated communities. More often than not, an interpreter's role is solely as translator between English and the particular language of the target community. The most common image of the interpreter in legal work is that of the court interpreter. Court interpreters faithfully translate what was said in one language to another and back again.¹¹

However, interpreters can play a range of roles from "message passer" to

¹⁰ Robert W. Putsch, Cross-Cultural Health Care Program & Am. Insts. for Research, Language Access in Healthcare: Domains, Strategies, and Implications for Medical Education (Sept. 2002), www.xculture.org/resource/resources/category.cfm?Category=1.

¹¹ *Id.*

“clarifier” to “cultural broker” to “advocate.”¹² Samnang acted most frequently in the roles of “clarifier” and “cultural broker” rather than “message passer.” This was possible because of his legal background, his life experience in Cambodia, his judgment, maturity, and most of all his sensitivity and respect for the clients. Far more than just translating, his work as an interpreter served as a cultural bridge to the client, enabling the project team to provide high-quality legal representation.¹³

Still another factor is having a supportive team. Two Merrimack attorneys were assigned to work with Samnang. Each had to devote a designated number of hours to the project. Time was to be spent on community legal education, outreach, and casework. The project staff would meet on a regular basis to monitor progress and address any concerns.

A year and a half later, the project is doing well. The increase in the number of Cambodian clients has prompted the hiring of a part-time receptionist who speaks English, Khmer, and Vietnamese. Clients report feeling more comfortable as they are greeted at the front desk in their native language. The number of walk-ins has increased dramatically. The hiring of another Khmer-speaking staff member has allowed Samnang to take on more cases and to find time to work on creating more Khmer brochures and information packets for clients.

Yet another factor in the project’s success is the project’s strong relationship with a number of community organizations such as SABAI (bilingual advocates), the Department of Mental Retardation, the Lowell Community Health Center, the Meta Health Center, the Lowell Alliance, and the Cambodian Mutual Assistance

Association. Advocates from these organizations continually refer clients with legal issues to the project. Staff members remain steadfast in their commitment to provide community legal education through training and workshops for clients and community advocates, from whom feedback is elicited. The shared goal continues to be the development of more effective ways to serve the growing Cambodian population in Lowell.

Although we have experienced a great deal of success with this project, it continues to face some challenges. Project staff members must continue their outreach efforts, especially as new laws and regulations are implemented. Both community advocates and clients have come to rely on the project to inform them of the latest changes in the law. (There are only two Cambodian attorneys in Massachusetts, both of them in private practice.)

In the past two years there has been an increase in the number of other ethnic groups in the Lowell area. A growing number of African American and Portuguese residents are not aware of the programs and services that are available to them. These two emerging groups are expected to have a strong voice in the Lowell community. Merrimack will have to face the challenge of replicating the Cambodian model and tailoring it to the needs of newer communities.

AT THIS WRITING, THE AFOREMENTIONED CAMBODIAN client is still awaiting her date in probate court. She seems hopeful that she will get full custody of her four children. Her initial hesitations are slowly being replaced with the new belief that perhaps this is a country where a person’s sins are indeed buried with their past lives.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*